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ABSTRACT

School counselors are beginning to find family counseling an effective and needed skill. Moreover, family counseling represents a distinctive alternative for resolving persistent problems in the schools. Re-training opportunities for school counselors wanting to engage in family counseling have been limited. With appropriate training, administrative support, and flexible work hours, school counselors can provide an effective and efficient service to children, their families, and the schools. (ABL)

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Family Counseling in the Schools

J. Scott Hinkle

Overview

School counselors are becoming more aware of a larger unit of intervention that includes the family. Family interventions by school counselors can address a child's misbehavior, making costly special placements unnecessary. Furthermore, school counselors are in a unique position to appreciate the effectiveness of family counseling approaches with children. This digest presents information regarding brief family counseling in the schools and re-training school counselors already in the work force to provide family counseling.

School children react to changes and stress within the family unit in which they belong. For example, children can become symptomatic at school when a crisis occurs at home; these symptoms may then serve a systems function by getting help for the troubled family. Using this family systems approach, school counselors can apply family counseling to solve a child's problems and assist the child's family in finding solutions to problems from a social context. Therefore, from a systemic perspective, dated cause-and-effect logic becomes meaningless when dealing with children in the schools.

After eliminating specific school causes for presenting problems, school counselors should consider etiology that is based out of school. According to systems theory, when a child's problem persists, it is usually connected to the extended social unit or family. Therefore, it is best to solve the problem by including the school as well as the family in formulating a solution. This perspective suggests that a student's negative behavior is connected to how the parents and other family members respond when the problem behavior occurs. It is important for the school/family counselor to ask *how the problem is maintained in the system*?

Idiosyncratic approaches to school problems have at times required inordinant amounts of time and resulted in little substantial improvement. However, school counselors utilizing family counseling within the school have reported successful interventions for brief periods of time when compared to lengthy individual counseling. If the problem is more complicated or requires long-term counseling, family interviews conducted by school counselors can significantly aid in a referral to an outside community agency. If the family is referred outside the school, the school counselor may even attend the first "extended family" session.

Re-Training: Competencies for School Counselors

There has been limited family counseling training in school counseling programs, resulting in little family counseling among school counselors. However, this approach to helping children with difficulties is increasing. As a result, school counselors re-training in family counseling will need to obtain support from school administrators. After support is established, training will ultimately require a paradigm shift for those counselors previously trained in one-to-one, individualistic counseling. To utilize the family systems approach, the school counselor will need to become more directive, less passive and neutral, and expand upon skills developed during training in individual counseling. Effectively dealing with the transition from the role of helper to change agent also will be an important aspect of re-training.

Such re-training should focus on elective study in family counseling that may include additional graduate courses, continuing education, and/or inservice training. Re-training in family counseling prepares a counselor to work in a limited role with families. It may include introductory graduate courses in family counseling and subsequent supervised practice. Disadvantages to this re-training format include limited preparation to deal with complex systems problems. However, advantages include "on the job" exposure to family counseling without extended training.

In addition, becoming familiar with the literature in family counseling is essential to re-training. This should continue with a focus on family counseling skills and techniques. Since they typically have not learned sufficient techniques to begin effective family counseling, school counselors will find readings about family counseling quite rewarding.

It is also beneficial for school counselors re-training in family counseling to form study groups and affiliate with professionals who specialize in family counseling. Study groups can view and learn from videotapes of master counselors in addition to their own family counseling. Role

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playing and consulting with each other regarding family cases will also be helpful. School counselors can also seek out local family counselors willing to provide consultation and/or supervision. Additionally, opportunities to do co-therapy with experienced family counselors should be sought in order to develop specific competencies in family counseling.

Specific Family Counseling Competencies

Two primary skills for school counselors doing brief family counseling in the schools are assessing the family's capacity to change and defining the key concepts of the problem within a social context. The brevity of this digest does not allow for an extended analysis of family assessment. However, assessment should minimally include obtaining new information which leads to hypothesis generation regarding the family. Identifying the family hierarchy in terms of "power" and knowing how and where family information flows also is important to family assessment. Assessment should always include the family's understanding of the problem and the family's strengths, as well as what the family has done thus far to solve the problem.

Eventually, family interventions within the school will include the development of a plan and a prescription that includes reframing problem behavior and assigning homework tasks. School counselors will need to acquire skills at establishing rapport with the family system, showing caring and concern, as well as sharing positive characteristics of the child with the family.

Consulting with parents about their child and assisting with their understanding of child and adolescent behavior also are important family counseling competencies. Many parents need assistance with re-establishing their executive position as primary decision-makers within their family. Effective relationships between parents and grandparents and other extended family members also must be established. Parents frequently need help in establishing behavioral expectations and discipline for their children. Child behavioral problems that are a function of marital discord should also be identified and an appropriate referral made.

Conclusion

Within the school-counseling profession, school counselors are beginning to find family counseling an effective and needed skill. Moreover, family counseling represents a distinctive alternative for resolving persistent problems in the schools. Family counseling training has a short history and re-training opportunities for school counselors wanting to engage in family counseling have been limited. This digest has presented a need for such training and one possible direction in which to proceed. With appropriate training, administrative support, and flexible work hours, school counselors can provide an effective and efficient service to children, their families, and the schools.

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